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MARCH 1975

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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I approached the desk clerk. "Do you have a spare key to room 4168?"

"You've lost yours, sir?"

"No. My wife has the key. But she's either gone out or she's inside asleep. I suppose I could

TOO SOLID MILDRED

*Yes, it is true that in certain cases one must make exceptions.*



wake her by pounding on the door, but she's a heavy sleeper and I'd prefer not to create a scene in the process."

He checked the register. "Room 4168? James Dodson?"

I nodded. "Mr. and Mrs. James Dodson."

He pursed his lips for a moment. "The register lists only a James Dodson."

I peered at the inverted name for a moment and then shrugged. Apparently I had registered myself only; possibly wishful thinking.

Mildred and I had arrived here at two-thirty in the morning. We had intended to get in much earlier, but I'd had trouble with the car, trouble which still hadn't been properly diagnosed by a succession of crossroad mechanics.

After registering we had gone up to our room, accompanied by the bellboy with our luggage. Before retiring I had set my traveling alarm for seven.

When the alarm rang, I had left Mildred to her sleep, and driven the car in search of a garage. I

had found one some eight blocks from the hotel and left the car there. On the walk back, I had stopped at a restaurant for breakfast.

All in all, I had been gone for an hour or possibly an hour and a half. When I reached our room, Mildred had not answered my tentative knocks.

The desk clerk handed me a key and I took the elevator back up to the fourth floor. I inserted the key into the lock and opened the door.

Mildred was not in bed. The door to the bathroom was ajar and I could see that she was not in there either.

I shrugged. Probably she had gone out for breakfast, though usually she was a late sleeper.

I sat down. The day outside had begun hot and muggy and it would not improve, but the room was comfortably cool. Frankly, I would have preferred to spend the day up here—the room was quiet and relaxing—but Mildred would drag me about the oceanside in search of what she deemed a vacation.

There was a knock at the door. It was the maid to change the sheets and tidy up the room.

Mildred had spent the night on the twin bed nearer the window, but now I noticed that it ap-

peared to be neatly made up, as though it hadn't been slept in at all. My bed, on the other hand, was considerably rumpled.

The maid finished my bed and appeared about to skip Mildred's.

"My wife slept there last night," I said.

The maid glanced at me for a moment, shrugged, then pulled back the blankets. From where I sat, it seemed that the sheets were still crisp and ironed. The maid sighed, but changed them.

She began dusting things here and there, then got down on her hands and knees to peer under the beds.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"The other ash tray. There are supposed to be two in this type room. One on each bedside table. But one's missing."

I helped her look, but we did not find the other ash tray.

She regarded me obliquely. "Sometimes the guests accidentally pack an ash tray in their luggage when they leave."

I stared at her coldly. "I am not leaving. Besides, I steal only towels and soap."

When she was done and gone, I took off my jacket and opened the closet to hang it up. My clothes still hung there in a neat row, but Mildred's things were gone.

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I frowned. I had seen her unpack her suitcases before she turned in and she had hung up her things. I was positive of that, and she had left her empty suitcases beside her bed.

Her suitcases were gone too.

Strange. I opened the bureau drawers. My shirts and underwear were there and in order, but the other drawers were empty.

I moved to the bathroom. My toothbrush in its plastic case and a small tube of toothpaste lay on the basin counter, but only *my* toothbrush. Mildred's was missing. Yet she had brushed her teeth before retiring. She made a ritual out of it.

I searched the room more thoroughly. There was not a trace of Mildred's things, not even the hotel key. It was almost as though she had never been in this room at all.

I sat down again. It was all most peculiar. If she had merely gone out for breakfast, surely she wouldn't have taken along bag and baggage.

I smiled at a pleasant thought. Suppose Mildred had decided to leave me. I sighed. Mere fantasy, I was afraid.

There was really nothing to do but wait a bit. No sense in running about creating noise. There was some logical explanation to

this and Mildred would return soon and clear up everything.

I turned on the television set and became absorbed in a program on coopering in early colonial America. That was followed by a segment on the collecting of antique glass beer bottles, whole and fragmented. Even The Busy Knitter proved fascinating. At home, Mildred's daytime television viewing was reserved exclusively for serials and game shows.

At the onset of Sesame Street, I turned off the set. I rather wished I'd brought some books along. However, spending a vacation with Mildred does not leave allowance for anything as intelligent as reading.

I went to the window and looked down at the street. There they were, the people moving and sweating in the sun, dragging whining sunburned children from place to place, desperately telling themselves they were having a glorious time. Why the devil didn't people have sense enough to spend their vacations in their own comfortable air-conditioned homes, surrounded by the conveniences of modern life?

Actually, Mildred had left our home a week before I did. She had spent that time with her sister in Pennsylvania and then taken the local bus to Harrisburg. I had

picked her up at the bus depot and we had continued on to the coast.

I sat down in the easy chair again. Why had I married Mildred in the first place? We really had nothing in common, even now. All the money was still firmly in her name. By marrying Mildred, I had achieved security, though not serenity and prosperity.

Had Mildred gone down to breakfast and met with some accident? Surely I would be notified, wouldn't I? In time. She had plenty of identification on her, including the tagged hotel key.

I frowned. There was that baggage to consider. That indicated a certain *design*. She had left *with* her luggage. It was not simply a matter of stepping out to breakfast.

My eyes went to the second twin bed again.

Suppose, just *suppose*, that Mildred had actually run off with another man. How could she possibly have attracted him? She was six years older than the day I had married her and time had lent no improvement to her beauty, nature, or tongue. Besides, I rather felt that if there were another man, I would know about him. I am not entirely unobservant.

At noon I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for lunch and

then stepped outside of the building, intending to take a walk. I stopped in my tracks. The temperature was at least in the mid-nineties with a commensurate high humidity. It was insane to venture out in such a hostile atmosphere, and yet the streets were teeming with perspiring flesh and bad tempers.

I stepped back into the hotel, picked up some paperbacks at the stand in the lobby, and went back up to the coolness of my room. I telephoned room service, ordered a bottle of brandy sent up, and spent the afternoon reading and sipping brandy. By six, Mildred still had not returned.

Was it actually possible that she had run away with someone? Surely not with any of our socio-economic peers—but possibly some ambitious chauffeur?

I chuckled. We had no chauffeur. Just a cook, who lived out, and a housekeeper who lived in and was really quite sullen about her status.

I stared at Mildred's bed again. Why should she have made up her bed before leaving? Did she even know *how*? As far as I could remember, she had never made a bed in our entire married life.

I sipped more brandy.

The Prescotts had a chauffeur, a ratty-looking little man; and the

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Dormans, though their chauffeur was really a college student hired for the summer to transport the Dorman children to tennis lessons and such nonsense.

If not a chauffeur, why not a gardener? We had no gardener either. The Acme AAA Landscaping and Lawn Service people sent over two men once a week during the summer and adequately cared for our half an acre. Could it be one of them?

I resisted the impulse to giggle. If not a chauffeur or gardener, why not a gamekeeper? There ought to be some of those around somewhere.

By eight o'clock, I felt quite happy, fuzzy, and sleepy. I yawned and lay down on the bed. When I woke, it was nearly 11:30. Mildred still had not come back.

I sat up slowly. I could still feel the effects of the brandy, though not as pleasantly as before. I am really not a drinking man—perhaps three or four times a year on festive occasions is enough for me. I took some aspirin.

If Mildred had run away with someone, would she have left without her money? Of course not. Mildred was quite sensible about money. She would never abandon it, I felt certain, despite any passion involved.

Had she been liquidating her as-

sets behind my back? I shook my head. No. That was not possible. Liquidating one's assets is not done by a snap of one's fingers. It takes time. Too, I was aware of the placement of every penny of her money and none of it had been moved.

Yet Mildred was missing—bag and baggage.

I went back to the brandy. When a wife disappears without a word, people, especially the police, have a tendency to suspect the worst—possibly foul play—and the husband is invariably the chief suspect, especially if he were somewhat tardy in reporting his wife's disappearance.

I would have to report Mildred's disappearance here and now, this moment. I put on my jacket, took a bit more brandy to steady me, and took the elevator to the main floor.

It was nearly midnight and the desk clerks appeared to be changing shifts. I recognized one of them as the man who had been at the desk when Mildred and I arrived.

I spoke to him. "Pardon me, but how does one go about reporting a missing wife? Which authorities do I notify and such?"

Both desk clerks appeared immediately interested, and Hames—I learned his name later—spoke.

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“Mr. James Dodson?” he asked.

I felt somewhat flattered that he remembered my name, especially my first. I had no idea I made such a strong impression on strangers.

Hames smiled. “You said something about a wife?”

“Yes. I haven’t seen her since seven this morning when I went out to see about some car repairs. I thought she might have gone shopping or something of the sort, but she still hasn’t come back and, frankly, I’m beginning to get just a little worried.”

Hames back-turned a few pages of the register. “Ah, yes. James Dodson. That is the only name we have here. No wife.”

I smiled. “I don’t care what the register says. I came here with a wife and she’s missing.”

Hames appeared apologetic. “I’m sorry, sir. But I distinctly remember that when you registered, you were alone. Absolutely alone.”

I blinked.

So did the clerk going off duty. His name subsequently proved to be Mulligan. He was a small, sharp-featured man who rather reminded me of the Prescotts’ chauffeur.

I tried a laugh. “When I registered, I had a wife with me. One is hardly likely to forget some-

thing like that, is one?” I said.

Hames agreed. “No, sir. However, you were alone.” He turned to a group of bellboys, all ears, lounging close by, and beckoned imperiously.

One of them detached himself immediately and trotted to the desk. I now recognized him as the same man who had carried our bags up to our room.

“This man,” Hames said, indicating me, “says he registered here with his wife. If I remember correctly, you took his bags up?”

The bellboy nodded eagerly. “Yes, sir. But it was just him, sir. He was alone. He didn’t have any wife with him or any other woman either.”

I stared at him. “She is a tall, large-boned, unforgettable woman who wore a monstrous red hat.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the bellboy said, “but you were alone.”

I am not one to doubt my sanity, my intelligence, or my eyes. My wife had been with me when I registered. Hames had been at the desk. Come to think of it, Hames and the bellboy had been the only people about at that hour of the morning.

Yet now the two of them lied. Why?

Mulligan edged into the conversation with a sharp-toothed smile. “Not that I wish to alarm you, sir,

but have you tried calling hospitals? Did she carry identification with her?"

"She has plenty of identification. I think I would have been notified by now if anything had happened to her."

Mulligan nodded. "I think we'd better call in the police, sir. Among other things, they could search the hotel from top to bottom."

Hames glared at him. "This is *my* shift. You have been officially relieved for the last five minutes. If the police are to be called, *I* will make that decision."

Why should Hames and the bellboy lie? My mind suddenly leaped to the ultimate. Was this more than just a disappearance? Was foul play indeed involved? Was Mildred dead? Murdered? Were Hames and the bellboy deeply involved in the death? If they were, undoubtedly they had arranged some sort of self-protection or alibi—and this was it?

I found myself faintly perspiring.

Would that leave *me* vulnerable? In a murder situation it hardly seemed wise for me to have been the last person to have seen Mildred alive. The police tend to fasten on situations like that.

Wouldn't it be more intelligent

if I said that Mildred had *failed* to meet me at that bus station in Harrisburg? I'd had trouble with the car and been late. I had assumed that she had gotten tired of waiting for me and had continued on by other means. That would mean her sister was the last one to see Mildred alive. Let *her* do the explaining and the sweating? After all, she was into Mildred's will by at least a third.

What, after all, was really the point in my insisting that I had come here with Mildred? Hames and the bellboy were here to contradict me—for their own reasons—and they outnumbered me, two to one.

If I scratched their backs, so to speak, they would scratch mine.

I smiled vacuously and hiccupped. "To be absolutely honest, I don't really remember registering at *all* last night." I grinned, and exhaled essence of brandy about me. "I remember waking up this morning, but that's about it. Did somebody have to help me up to my room?"

Hames quickly appropriated that. "You were just a bit under the weather, I'm afraid, sir." He indicated the bellboy. "Eddie had to help you up. You went to sleep as soon as he put you down on the bed."

I hiccupped again. "What I

really need is a little old drink and I've got that in my room." I moved back toward the elevators, managing to stagger a bit.

I found Mulligan guiding me by the elbow. "I'll see you to your room, sir. But I still think that you ought to notify the police."

"Nonsense," I snapped. "I have these hallucinations about my wife all the time."

"Are you positive it was a hallucination, sir?"

"Positive. Mildred never wears red hats. Can't stand the color. Whenever I see her wearing a red hat, I know I'm hallucinating."

"But you didn't seem to think that you had been hallucinating when you approached the desk."

"Sometimes it takes me longer than usual to realize I've been hallucinating."

Mulligan accompanied me up in the elevator. "Have you and your wife been traveling in India or the Far East lately? When you last saw your wife, did she appear a bit ill? Did she show any traces of the bubonic plague?"

I stared at him.

He had sharp yellow-black eyes. "Suppose she contracted a plague, though not necessarily bubonic. It would be bad for the hotel's image, not to mention a threat to the entire region's tourist trade. Suppose Hames tried to cover it

up? He spirited away the corpse and pretended that nothing had happened, even to the extent of maintaining that your wife had never been here in the first place. I wouldn't put anything past Hames and his brother."

"His brother?"

"Yes. The bellboy. Eddie. He's an ex-convict, you know. Breaking and entering."

At the door of my room, Mulligan peered intently at the number plate.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I thought it just possible that the number plate on this door might have been switched. But I see that there is dust here that couldn't have accumulated in just one night. Are you certain this is the same *floor* Eddie took you to last night?"

"I have never lost a floor in my life." I unlocked the door and left Mulligan outside.

I now dismissed entirely the idea that Mildred had run away. Something had happened to her, and the Hames brothers were deeply involved.

Eddie was an ex-convict; breaking and entering.

I had left this room at approximately seven a.m. Mildred had been stirring when I left. Had she gone back to sleep or had she de-

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cided to go out for breakfast?

Had Eddie seen both of us leave this room? Had he let himself in and begun rummaging among our things?

Since Mildred's breakfast usually consists of a cup of coffee, she had returned too soon, had walked in on Eddie, caught him in the act. There had been a struggle. He had struck her with something. The missing ash tray? Those things always seem to be around when you need them—and Mildred had died.

Eddie had gone to his brother and told him what had happened. They had decided that if the body were found, Eddie, being the hotel's only ex-convict, would be immediately suspected. They had decided not only to get rid of the body, but to make it appear that Mildred had never been here at all.

But wouldn't that still leave a rather sticky situation for them? I would insist that I had come here with Mildred and they would insist that I hadn't. The police would undoubtedly be called in to referee.

Wouldn't it have been much better for Hames and his brother if they had just maintained that they *saw* Mildred walk out of the hotel, with or without baggage?

I poured brandy and tried to

think. A half hour later, there was a knock at my door.

It was Mulligan, rubbing his hands. "I managed to sneak a look at the register. Page 79 is missing."

"I fail to see any significance in that."

Mulligan giggled slightly. "I think I see it all. When you came here with your wife, you registered as Mr. & Mrs. James Dodson on the top line of a new page. Page 79, to be exact. But later, Hames, for his own nefarious reasons, tore out that page and copied your name, and the names of guests who registered subsequently to you, on page 81."

"What happened to page 80?"

"Well, page 79 is on one side of the sheet, and page 80 on the other."

"How clever of you hotel people. But I did not come here with my wife. Nor did I register the both of us. I registered only myself. I now *distinctly* remember that as I was signing in—in my fumbling condition—I accidentally tore the page nearly in half. So Hames removed it entirely from the register and I signed the next page."

Mulligan stared at me, a revolting half-smile on his face. "If you weren't involved with the Hames brothers before, you appear to be

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now." His eyes seemed to glitter. "I don't know the reason for all of this, but I will find out. I know how to put two and two together."

I had the sinking feeling that he did, and would. I shut the door in his face and went back to the brandy.

What about Mildred's body? Not to mention her luggage. Can one blithely cart a body out of a hotel at eight or so in the morning without running the high risk of being seen? No. The most obvious thing to do would be to store it in another room until it could be picked up at a more convenient time. Possibly in the early hours of this very morning? Where would this room be? Close by, certainly, and the closer, the better.

Inspired by my rationale, I stepped into the corridor. I moved cautiously to the door immediately to the right of mine. Slowly I turned the knob. The door was unlocked and I eased it open a crack.

The room was quite occupied by two people of the opposite sexes. That much was readily apparent and they were both very alive, active, and preoccupied.

I quickly closed the door. Why the devil didn't people have the decency to lock their doors when

they were doing things like that?

Obviously I couldn't continue going up and down the corridor trying doors. There was no telling what I might stumble into.

My eyes went to an unnumbered door squarely at the end of the corridor. The service closet? Would Mildred's body be in there? Not very likely, but it would be a perfect place for me to hide and watch, in the event that someone chose to retrieve Mildred's body from wherever it was stored.

I fetched the bottle of brandy from my room and made myself as comfortable as possible among the mops, pails, and detergents in the service closet, leaving the door slightly ajar. I waited, sipping brandy. At 2:30 I restrained the considerable impulse to break into song, namely "Abdul Abulbul Ameer."

By three o'clock I had finished the bottle and was contemplating a return to my room, when I heard the high squeak of wheels and Eddie hove into view, pushing a hand truck on which reposed a large steamer trunk. He trundled it farther down the corridor to a door, opened it, and disappeared inside.

I waited ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. What was taking him so long?

Finally the door opened again and Eddie appeared, wheeling the hand truck with its steamer trunk, on top of which reposed Mildred's two suitcases.

I opened the service room door and stepped out, lurching just slightly. "Ah, ha! Do you deny for a moment that a corpse resides in that trunk?"

Eddie whitened and then sighed. "I don't deny it, but I got to talk to my brother. He does the thinking for both of us."

"Very well," I said stiffly. "You may use the phone in my room."

Eddie wheeled his cargo into my room and used the phone. He wiped his forehead. "My brother will be right up."

I folded my arms. "You murdered my wife because she caught you red-handed trying to ransack our room."

Eddie looked hurt. "I wasn't ransacking. Just looking. I been going straight for seven years now and I got a wife and three kids. I don't steal anymore, but I still got the hobby."

"Hobby?"

"I go through people's stuff and figure how much I *could* steal if I wanted to. But it's all on paper. Last year I could've cleared over forty grand, but I never took a thing."

"But my wife caught you and

she *thought* you were stealing?"

He nodded glumly. "She came at me swinging this purse, and I ducked. Her heel caught on something and she fell. Her head hit the ash tray on the night table and broke it right in two. The ash tray, I mean. Didn't do her head much good either. But it was a swift death, sir. She felt no pain, I assure you."

"Why didn't you just leave the premises? Why all this hocus-pocus?"

"Fingerprints," Eddie said. "Even if the police thought it was an accident, they'd still go through the routine of covering the room for fingerprints. Just in case. And I left mine all over the place. So how would I explain that to them? Me, an ex-con. I didn't wear no gloves because I wasn't going to steal anything, so why bother? I left fingerprints in places that I couldn't even remember, so there was no point in even trying to wipe them off. I told my brother what happened and we decided that the only thing to do was get rid of the body so that nobody would even think murder."

"But why take the luggage too?"

"Because when she fell she got blood on the suitcases. She didn't bleed much. Just on the suitcases,

one of which was open, and a blanket that was draped on the floor. So we had to get rid of all that. And we knew that when the police investigated your missing wife and found that her *empty* suitcases were gone too, they'd do a lot of probing because people just don't disappear with empty suitcases. That meant we had to pack up all the rest of her things too. We decided that it would be best just to pretend that she had never been here in the first place and it would be our word against yours."

"Wouldn't it have been simpler if you and your brother had simply said that you *saw* her leave the hotel? With the baggage?"

"We thought of that too, but somebody would have had to carry her baggage downstairs, and the doorman would have had to call a cab. And the concession stands were open and them people got sharp eyes. A lot of people would have had to remember seeing her go. Like you said, she was big-boned and such and hard to overlook."

"What were you going to do with my wife's body?"

"My brother's got this piece of land up north with an old dry well. We thought we'd dump her down there and just fill it to the top with dirt. Nobody would ever

know one damn thing about it."

There was a knock at the door and I let Hames into the room.

He glanced quickly about the room, at the trunk, and then at his brother. "What have you told him?"

Eddie cleared his throat. "Practically nothing."

Hames rubbed his hands. "Let me see. What do we have here? You, Mr. Dodson, called the desk. You requested that a steamer trunk be sent up to your room. Eddie brought it up. You told him to return in twenty minutes. He did. You told him to take the trunk downstairs to the basement where you would arrange to have it picked up later. Eddie noticed bloodstains on the suitcases."

Here Hames turned over the suitcases, revealing dark blotches. "And considering all of this hanky-panky business about a missing wife, he immediately suspected something amiss and called me. And here I am. Shall we open the trunk or shall I leave that to the police?"

"Now just one damn minute," I said, righteously outraged. "You aren't going to pin this on me."

Hames smiled. "Why not? It is our word against yours. We are *two* and you are *one*."

I countered. "Eddie's fingerprints are all over this room and

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probably also on the *inside* of that trunk. How will you explain *that* to the police?"

Hames pondered for a moment. "Very well, then, sir. If Eddie and I must go to prison, we will take you with us. We will maintain that you *hired* us to murder your wife."

Eddie regarded him with admiration. "That's right. If we got to go down, we take everybody with us."

Obviously they were prepared to drag me into this mess too. What, after all, did they have to lose? As a matter of fact, they might have considerable to gain if they cooperated with the police and testified against me.

Hames broke the impasse with a smile. "On the other hand, sir, why should mature men such as we go to the police at all? A lot of trouble for all *three* of us could be avoided if . . ." He shrugged.

I sighed—a sticky business. Hames did seem to have a point there.

"And what about Eddie's children?" Hames said. "Without his guidance and counseling in future years they will probably become delinquents."

Eddie wiped at one eye.

The last touch had hardly been necessary. I stared at them coldly. "So be it. Take the body and dispose of it. What is done cannot be undone."

Eddie prepared to leave with his cargo. "I'll unload the trunk in the station wagon and then bring it back up for your wife's body, Mr. Dodson."

I stared at him. "My wife's body isn't in the trunk?"

"No, sir," Eddie said. "I was just about to put her into the trunk when Mulligan jumped out of the closet. I guess he put two and two together, like he always claimed he could, and he was waiting for me. What he had in mind wasn't the police. It was blackmail. For all three of us." Eddie coughed slightly. "I guess I broke another ash tray. Mulligan's in the trunk."

Hames sighed. "I suppose I'll have to arrange a reason for Mulligan's disappearance. A shortage in the hotel's accounts should cover it."

When they left, I gave Eddie five dollars. Ordinarily I do not subscribe to overtipping, but there are exceptions.

Then I hiccupped genuinely and went to bed.